

REMARKS

Claims 1-8 and 10-13 remain in the application. Claim 13 is newly added but does not add any new matter.

The Office Action rejected Claims 1-12 as being indefinite under 35 U.S.C. §112. Applicant has amended the claims to overcome this rejection by replacing the term “operable to” to “configured to” as suggested by the Office Action. Thus, the rejection should be withdrawn.

The Office Action rejected Claims 1-12 as being directed towards non-statutory matter under 35 U.S.C. §101. Applicant has amended the claims to overcome the rejection.

The technological area of workflow management is a crowded field. With the world increasingly dependent on computers, the ability to control who has access to what documents and to perform what functions has been a source of increasing development and research. Thus, any minor improvement, no matter how small, could be the difference between commercial success and failure.

“Thus when differences that may appear technologically minor nonetheless have a practical impact, particularly in a crowded field, the decision-maker must consider the obviousness of the new structure in this light.”

Continental Can Co. USA Inc. v. Monsanto Co., 20 U.S.P.Q. 2d. 1746, 1752 (Fed. Cir. 1991).

The present invention results from the discovery that by ensuring the effective period start dates of approval relation information falls within an acceptable time period, errors and delays where no one is authorized to perform a critical function can be reduced. The present invention also results from the discovery that by controlling who can modify the approval relation information, fraudulent activities can be prevented.

The Office Action rejected Claims 1-12 under 35 U.S.C. §102 as being anticipated by *Nishihara et al.* (EP Pub. No. EP 1,033,666).

“An anticipating reference must describe the patented subject matter with sufficient clarity and detail to establish that the subject matter existed in the prior art and that such existence would be recognized by persons of ordinary skill in the field of the invention.” *See In re Spada*, 911 F.2d 705, 708, 15 USPQ2d 1655, 1657 (Fed. Cir. 1990); *Diversitech Corp. v. Century Steps, Inc.*, 850 F.2d 675, 678, 7 USPQ2d 1315, 1317 (Fed. Cir. 1988).

The present invention increases the efficiency of an approval authority registration system by reducing the delays caused when accidentally nobody is designated as having the authority to accomplish certain critical functions. The present invention accomplishes this by checking the effective period start dates of new approval relation information. If the effective period start date is outside a predetermined range, then the effective date is determined to be invalid and a user is notified that the effective date is invalid. (Pg. 7, ln. 23 – Pg. 8, ln. 24).

Thus, even if a user inputs an inappropriate effective period start, the user is notified of the erroneous effective period start date. The user can then enter in a correct effective period start date. This can prevent delays in the approval process due to a period where there is nobody authorized to perform certain functions due to a “no-approval-authorized-person” period in the department. (Pg. 8, ln. 25 – Pg. 9, ln. 3). Furthermore, by checking to ensure that a proxy is authorized to register approval relation information, fraudulent registration of the approval relation information can be prevented. (Pg. 6, lns. 6 – 15)

Nishihara reduces the delay time in a workflow system for allowing designated users to process a business work item when a user in charge is absent. (¶ 0001) It accomplishes this by allowing the user in charge to pre-designate a substitute user and allowing both the user in charge and pre-designated substitute user to work on each process that is transferred. (¶¶ 0016 –

0020) This can prevent work from accumulating on the user in charge that is absent. (¶¶ 0013; 0019)

With respect to Claim 1, *Nishihara* does not teach or suggest “a second judging unit configured to, only when the first judging unit has judged that the user matches neither the specified approval-authorized person nor the specified approval object person, judge whether there is a no-approval-authorized-person period between an effective period indicated by the new piece of approval relation information which is one of the one or more pieces of approval relation information having been registered with the database and indicates a same approval object person as the new piece of approval relation information.” While *Nishihara* discloses a “substitution effective term,” there is no indication in *Nishihara* that the substitution effective term is checked prior to its institution to ensure that there is no “no-approval-authorized-person” period. *Nishihara* is only concerned with allowing a pre-designated substitute user to exist. However, *Nishihara* does not check to ensure that a pre-designated substitute user is available at predetermined time periods to prevent delays. Thus, when a new substitute user is to be entered to replace an old substitute user, there could be a period of time when there is no substitute user.

In contrast, the server 102 in the present invention checks to see whether a piece of approval relation information, which indicates the same approval object department as the input piece of approval relation information and has an effective period end date that continues to the effective period start date of the input piece of approval relation information, has already been registered with the department-specific approval relation information database 1032a. (Pg. 34, lns. 10 – 21).

Furthermore, *Nishihara* does not disclose “a registration unit configured to register the new piece of approval relation information with the database when the second judging unit has

judged that there is no no-approval-authorized-person period, and provide a warning that there is the no-approval-authorized-person period and prevent the new piece of approval relation information from being registered with the database when the second judging unit has judged that there is the no-approval-authorized-person period.” There is no indication in *Nishihara* that a warning is provided if a no-approval-authorized-person period is detected. Furthermore, *Nishihara* does not teach preventing the registration of the new substitute user information if a no-approval-authorized-person period is detected.

However, in the present invention, if no piece of approval relation information, which indicates the same approval object department as the input piece of approval relation information and has an effective period end date that continues to the effective period start date of the input piece of approval relation information, has already been registered with the department-specific approval relation information database 1032a, then a no-approval-authorized period is detected and a warning message is generated such as the one depicted in Figure 22. (Pg. 35, ln. 13 – Pg. 36, ln. 3) Furthermore, after a warning is shown in Step S1212, the new piece of approval relation information is denied and the process is restarted at step S1202 as seen in Figures 13 and 12. (Pg. 35, lns. 13 – 23).

Nishihara also does not disclose “one or more pieces of approval relation information, each of which indicates a relationship between an approval-authorized person and an approval object person who are both users of the approval authority registration system.” The Office Action cites to the “substitute user” as the approval object person. There is no indication in *Nishihara* that the substitute user is subordinate to the approval-authorized person.

However, in the present invention, the approval-authorized person is the superior of the approval object person and the approval object person is the subordinate of the approval-authorized person. (Pg. 17, ln. 24 – Pg. 18, ln. 3)

With respect to Claim 2, *Nishihara* fails to disclose “the first judging unit further judges whether an attribute of the user who input the registration request satisfies a predetermined condition by referring to the user attribute information.” In *Nishihara* the user in charge of the work item designates the substitute user within the limits 315. (¶ 0061; Fig. 5). The limit 315 is the qualification of the substitute user. *Nishihara* checks to make sure that that the substitute user and his limit (qualification) 315 is proper before allowing the substitute user to be designated by the user in charge of the work item. (¶ 0078). However, there is no indication in *Nishihara* that the user in charge of the work item is checked to ensure that he is allowed to enter a substitute user.

In contrast, in the present invention, the judging unit can determine if the user who input the registration request satisfied a predetermined condition by referring to the user attribute information. The registration unit may register the piece of approval relation information with the database if the judging unit determined that the attribute of the user satisfies the predetermined condition. Thus, the users or registrars who can register the approval relation information are limited to the people who satisfy predetermined qualification conditions. This can prevent the selection of a proxy registrar who is not a responsible person, thus preventing fraudulent registration of the approval relation information. (Pg. 6, lns. 6 – 15).

For Claim 4, *Nishihara* fails to recite “the receiving unit further receives, from a user via a terminal, a registration request requesting registration of a piece of approval relation information specifying a proxy approval-authorized person.” The Office Action cites to the

“substitute user” as the proxy approval-authorized person. However, the Office Action already cited to the “substitute user” as the approval object person in Claim 1.

With respect to Claim 5, *Nishihara* does not teach or suggest “a monitoring unit configured to monitor, at regular intervals, one or more effective periods respectively indicated by one or more pieces of approval relation information which, among the one or more pieces of approval relation information having been registered with the database, specify proxy approval-authorized persons.” The Office Action cited to the reminder message generated in *Nishihara*. However, *Nishihara* does not monitor the approval relation information which specify proxy approval-authorized persons.

The approval relation information as defined in Claim 1 also “indicates a relationship between an approval-authorized person and an approval object person who are both users of the approval authority registration system.” The reminder message in *Nishihara* is when “a work item elapses a predetermined threshold time” or “a work item received by a user who has accumulated a number of work items over a predetermined threshold.” (¶ 0034). When the user doesn’t respond, the reminder can be sent to the substitute user. (¶ 0035). However, while *Nishihara* monitors the work item to determine if it is overdue, there is no indication that *Nishihara* monitors the approval relation information which is the relationship between the approval authorized person and the approval object person and which can also specify a proxy-authorized person.

Nishihara also does not teach or suggest in Claim 5 “a notification unit configured to, when the monitoring unit has judged that one of the monitored one or more pieces of approval relation information has an effective period that expires within a predetermined range of days, notifies a notification destination corresponding to a user indicated by the one of the monitored

one or more pieces of approval relation information, of the judgment result by the monitoring unit.” Since *Nishihara* does not monitor the approval relation information, it does notify “a notification destination corresponding to a user indicated by the one of the monitored one or more pieces of approval relation information.”

In the present invention, the notification that the effective date for the proxy-authorized person will expire can be seen in Figure 19.

With respect to Claim 8, *Nishihara* fails to recite “if the receiving unit receives a piece of approval relation information with responsible person classification information indicating that an approval-authorized person is proxy, the judging unit judges whether the user who input a registration request requesting registration of the received piece of approval relation information matches a responsible person indicated by a piece of approval relation information that has already been registered with the database.” The Office Action cited to the “substitute user” as the proxy-authorized person. However the user of the item inputs the information regarding the substitute user. (¶ 0028). Thus, although the qualifications for the “substitute user” may be confirmed, there is no indication that the “substitute user” inputs approval relation information.

All arguments for patentability with respect to Claim 1 are repeated and incorporated herein for Claims 10-12.

With respect to Claim 13, *Nishihara* does not disclose “wherein in the one or more pieces of approval relation information, the approval-authorized person is defined as a superior of the approval object person and the approval object person is defined a subordinate of the approval-authorized person.” In *Nishihara*, there is no indication that the user is a superior of the substitute user and that the substitute user is a subordinate of the user.

Claims 2-8 and 13 depend from and further define Claim 1 and are thus patentable, too.

If the Examiner believes a telephone interview will help further the prosecution of this case, he is respectfully requested to contact the undersigned attorney at the listed phone number.

Very truly yours,

SNELL & WILMER L.L.P.



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